

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

SHOULD THE U.S. CONTINUE TO MAINTAIN FORCES IN KOREA?

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ABSTRACT

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The United States has maintained forces in the Republic of Korea (ROK) since the armistice that halted fighting in the Korean War was signed in 1953. Although the ROK developed into a thriving democracy with a robust economy that far outstrips its northern rival, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), the ROK still depends heavily on the U.S. for its security and defense. Today, and foreseeably the next decade, the ability of the U.S. to maintain a large troop presence in Korea is being strained because of the significant number of ground troops required for ongoing combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. This paper will examine what level and mix of forces the U.S. should continue to maintain on the Korean Peninsula. It will answer the questions:

- Are U.S. forces required in Northeast Asia to maintain regional stability and or U.S. interests?
- Have past U.S. force reductions in Korea decreased stability/security in that region?
- Are ROK forces capable of providing sufficient security for and defending the ROK? If not, what capabilities do they lack?
- Should U.S. forces in Korea as well as those supporting from Japan be relocated? If so, where should they be located?

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SHOULD THE U.S. CONTINUE TO MAINTAIN FORCES IN KOREA?

The United States has maintained forces in the Republic of Korea (ROK) since the armistice that halted fighting in the Korean War was signed in 1953. After the armistice, the ROK developed into a thriving democracy with a robust economy that far outstrips its northern rival, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). Despite its economic power, the ROK still depends heavily on the U.S. for its defense. Today, the U.S. Army's ability to maintain a large troop presence in Korea is being strained because of the significant number of ground troops required for ongoing combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Recently, anti-American sentiment has erupted in the ROK and calls for the withdrawal of U.S. forces have become increasingly strident. These developments, along with the re-emerging crisis over North Korea's nuclear program and the vulnerability of U.S. forces on the Peninsula in their current configuration, make this an opportune time to review U.S. force structure in the Korean Theater of Operations.

This paper will show that the U.S. forces on the Korean Peninsula can be reduced without destabilizing the region. Because the ROK has made significant improvements in its ability to defend itself, the ground force component of U.S. Forces Korea could and should be downsized. The remaining U.S. Army ground combat forces must be repositioned to locations south of Seoul. These measures will reduce the vulnerability and increase the survivability of our remaining forces in the event of a sudden North Korean attack. Furthermore, it will better posture our forces for employment elsewhere in the region in support of the U.S. strategy for Northeast Asia.

CURRENT U.S. POLICY

Established in 1954, the Mutual Defense Treaty between the ROK and U.S. provides "the basis for the presence of U.S. Forces in Korea" after the armistice and commits us to helping defend South Korea.¹ More recently, our National Security Strategy requires that we "work with South Korea to maintain our vigilance towards the North while preparing our alliance to make contributions to the broader stability of the region over the longer term...."² Last year, U.S. Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, and his South Korean counterpart "agreed on the need to continue to maintain a U.S. troop presence on the Korean Peninsula and concurred that the alliance will serve to bolster peace and stability in Northeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific region as a whole."³ Although the U.S. believes a continued troop presence is necessary, it is re-evaluating the current basing of U.S. forces in Korea. The major U.S. ground combat unit, the

2nd Infantry Division, is positioned close to the demilitarized zone (DMZ) that separates the two Koreas.

Under the current stationing plan, the bulk of the U.S. ground combat forces and the major headquarters elements are on installations that we have occupied since the signing of the armistice.⁴ These units are in camps within range of North Korean artillery and potentially vulnerable to an attack that could have, “a certain Pearl-Harbor-like character if we’re not good at the way we interpret warnings.”⁵ Furthermore, according to the Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, “given the changes in Korea, these areas may no longer be the best places to be based.”⁶

VULNERABILITY OF U.S. FORCES IN THEIR CURRENT CONFIGURATION

Throughout the years, the U.S. forces in their vulnerable garrisons between Seoul and the demilitarized zone have served as a so-called “tripwire.” Any invasion by the DPRK would cause heavy casualties among these U.S. ground troops and certainly trigger U.S. reinforcement. As Colin Powell, who commanded an infantry battalion in Korea during the early 1970’s, wrote, the “2nd Infantry Division was there, to put it bluntly, to provide a buffer of American flesh and blood. We were there to obstruct a North Korean attack. If and when that danger ever lifted, the Army would pull out.”⁷ Although this strategy has apparently worked well, over the course of years since Powell served in Korea the U.S. forces have become more vulnerable. The maximum effective range of weapons has increased and the camps of the 2nd Infantry Division are “within mortar and artillery range of North Korea....”⁸ The camps of most of the frontline ROK Army divisions are also very vulnerable to this artillery. It has been assumed that friendly forces would receive some type of advance warning of an impending attack by the DPRK so that they could deploy out of their garrisons and disperse to and dig in at tactical assembly areas or man prepared battle positions. The significance of an accurate and unambiguous prediction of an impending North Korean attack cannot be overstated. In addition to allowing forces to deploy to assembly areas and battle positions for defensive operations, it is also required to allow time for evacuation of the 72,000 American noncombatants in South Korea.⁹

Unfortunately, there is obviously some doubt that the intelligence community can provide the necessary warning. Our history is filled with examples of significant intelligence failures such as Pearl Harbor, the 1950 North Korean attack, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the September 11, 2001 attacks, as well as the failure to accurately assess Iraqi weapons of mass destruction prior to Operation Iraqi Freedom last year. There is also a danger in the event that our intelligence

services incorrectly predict an impending attack. The movement of the 2nd Infantry Division and two entire ROK field armies from their camps to the field, unannounced, along with an evacuation of noncombatants might trigger a crisis or an attack by the North Koreans, who may view these steps as preparation for a pre-emptive attack.

CURRENT FORCE POSTURE LIMITS U.S. STRATEGIC OPTIONS

The presence of the 2nd Infantry Division so close to the DMZ also limits the options of strategists seeking to deal with North Korean provocation and its nuclear weapons programs. The fact that the DPRK can respond to U.S. air strikes by targeting the division camps with artillery severely complicates planning for a so-called “surgical strike” on the North Korean nuclear facilities. Additionally, planners would have to consider the risk to the thousands of U.S. troops, their dependents and other U.S. noncombatants in the South Korean capital of Seoul, which also can be targeted by long-range North Korean artillery and missiles.¹⁰

Senior U.S. military officers have long been aware of the dangerous predicament faced by U.S. forces deployed near the demilitarized zone.¹¹ But it has only been recently announced that something is going to be done about it. The U.S. plans to re-deploy the 2nd Infantry Division to an area south of the capital of Seoul.¹² However, simply repositioning existing forces and maintaining them at their current levels may not be enough. Some senior members of the U.S. Administration feel that the ROK must assume more responsibility for its own defense and have advocated troop cuts. For example, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld recently stated that, “it is time for [the ROK] to set a goal for becoming somewhat more self-reliant,” although he has also said, “the scope and timing of any troop cuts have not been decided.”¹³

ARE U.S. FORCES REQUIRED IN NORTHEAST ASIA TO MAINTAIN REGIONAL STABILITY AND/OR U.S. INTERESTS?

Northeast Asia is a critically important region for the U.S. because of its economic importance, the longstanding treaties it has with important allies in the area, and the problem of nuclear weapon and missile technology proliferation. Countries with four of the world’s six largest armed forces, China, Russia, North Korea and South Korea, are bordered in the region. Furthermore, the Korean Peninsula is the geographic junction of five of the regional powers: China, Russia, Japan and the two Koreas.¹⁴ The forward presence of U.S. forces has helped to assure the stability of this key region.

Northeast Asia has a major impact on the global economy and its countries play an important role in the annual \$500 billion of trans-Pacific trade.¹⁵ Japan and South Korea are economic

powerhouses. Although its growth has slowed in the past decade, Japan boasts the “second-most-technologically-powerful economy in the world after the US and third-largest economy after the US and China.”¹⁶ South Korea has the twelfth-largest gross domestic product (GDP) in the world and has enjoyed five straight years of growth after recovering from the 1997-1999 Asian financial crisis.¹⁷

Two of the five defense treaties in the U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM) theater involve Japan and the ROK and these agreements tie us to this critical region. Of the four major security problems in the USPACOM area of responsibility (AOR), Admiral Thomas Fargo, the commander of USPACOM, sees North Korea as the major security threat.¹⁸ The nations most threatened, Japan and the ROK, are the two nations in the region that we have security treaties with. South Korea and Japan, which has long been recognized as the most important ally of the U.S. in the USPACOM AOR, face the greatest risk from North Korea's offensively oriented military and development of weapons of mass destruction.

Our long-standing security relationships with Japan and the ROK are also important in supporting our operations outside the region. Japan, which has a very capable military and the fourth largest defense budget in the world, is supporting the U.S. in its global war on terror by sending 1,000 troops to Iraq.¹⁹ The ROK deployed 600 troops to Iraq early in Operation Iraqi Freedom and has decided to deploy an additional 3,000 service members.²⁰ This will make it the third largest contributor to the coalition.

Although the region's economy and the support we receive from our allies are important, the major reason for maintaining the U.S. presence in the region, particularly in South Korea, is as a deterrent to the DPRK. “North Korea poses many problems, of which its two nuclear programmes – the main worry of the moment – are just the start. Also alarming are its missile development and proliferation [and] its chemical and biological warfare capacity....”²¹ Northeast Asia therefore, is a critical region in the struggle against proliferation of nuclear weapons and missile technology. Our national security strategy requires that “we must be able to stop rogue states before they are able to ...use weapons of mass destruction against the United States and our allies and friends.”²² Both the PRC and Russia are nuclear powers, it is likely that the DPRK has several nuclear weapons, and the ROK and Japan are clearly capable of developing them. However, the presence of U.S. forces in the region and the implied willingness of the U.S. to provide a nuclear umbrella for the ROK and Japan, has been enough to keep them from pursuing their own nuclear weapons programs. A total withdrawal of U.S. forces from the Korean Peninsula, or elsewhere in the Northeast Asia region, at a time when tensions over the

North Korean nuclear program are increasing, would risk sending the wrong message to both our allies and the North Koreans.

IMPACT OF PREVIOUS U.S. TROOP REDUCTIONS IN KOREA ON REGIONAL STABILITY

As a result of the ever-changing balance of forces and various strategic or political considerations, from time to time the U. S. has adjusted its force level in Korea, usually in a downward direction. In fact, at one point in the late 1970's, President Jimmy Carter announced that U.S. ground combat troops would be totally withdrawn. This decision was subsequently reversed. In addition to President Carter's attempt at total disengagement, there have been three significant reductions to U.S. troop levels in Korea. Although these partial withdrawals have caused friction with the ROK government, they have not destabilized the Korean Peninsula or the Northeast Asia region. For the most part, tensions have been reduced in the periods that followed troop reductions. Past significant reductions include:

- By 1955, reducing the U.S. forces from three corps controlling a total of seven divisions to a single corps of two U.S. infantry divisions.²³
- Withdrawing one of the two remaining infantry divisions in 1971 as part of the Nixon Doctrine, under which the U.S. would no longer provide large ground forces to help its Asian allies maintain their freedom.²⁴
- President Carter's initiative for a total withdrawal that resulted in a reduction of about 3,000 troops before it was cancelled.²⁵
- The Nunn-Warner Amendment to the 1989 Defense Appropriation Bill, which called for a three phased reduction of about 7,000 troops.²⁶ After about 2,000 troops were withdrawn, this reduction was placed on hold indefinitely because of the 1994 crisis over the DPRK's nuclear program.²⁷

Of the four troop reductions made after the armistice, a period of reduced tensions, or at least a relatively stable level of tension has followed three.²⁸ In the latest case, the increase in tension was the result of the U.S. discovery of how far the four-decade North Korean nuclear weapons development program had progressed. The withdrawals have also been followed by a major increase in the capabilities of the ROK armed forces, usually planned as part of the withdrawal.

CAN SOUTH KOREA DEFEND ITSELF WITHOUT U.S. ASSISTANCE?

Despite its long-term reliance on the U.S., South Korea has developed formidable armed forces, that supported by the other elements of national power, are capable of defending the

nation and at least restoring the status quo in the event of an attack from the DPRK. The ROK has never sought to develop an organic capability to fully defend itself from the DPRK. In a report to Congress in 2000, the U.S. Secretary of Defense summarized the ROK strategy as follows:

The defense of the ROK has rested firmly in the framework of a combined US-ROK military system since the Korean War. The US has maintained an uninterrupted ground and air presence on the Peninsula since the Korean War ended in 1953. The South's military reflects these unique circumstances. The ROK military is organized, equipped, and trained to defeat a DPRK attack as part of a combined ROK/US defense. The ROK-US security alliance will remain central to the defense of the ROK for the foreseeable future.²⁹

More recently, the current U.S. Secretary of Defense said that, "he endorses President Roh Moo-hyun's vision of a South Korea that takes more responsibility for its own defense."³⁰ A comparison of all the elements of national power possessed by the ROK and its DPRK adversary clearly supports Rumsfeld's position.

DIPLOMATIC POWER

North Korea is one of the most isolated nations in the world and has long pursued a policy of *juche*, meaning one of self-reliance. It is essentially "a diplomatic nonentity."³¹ Formerly a client state of the now defunct Soviet Union, North Korea's chief ally is now the People's Republic of China (PRC). However the ROK has undermined this relationship by establishing its own diplomatic relations with the PRC as well as establishing them with Russia, leaving the DPRK even more isolated. Other than the PRC:

Pyongyang does not have any other allies of note.... Despite a recent charm offensive that led to official ties with a number of Asian and European nations, the renewed nuclear program has brought that diplomatic effort to a halt. Whatever good will North Korea's summit with Japan has generated has dissipated; the U.S. will talk about nothing else until the nuclear issue is resolved.³²

In contrast to the growing isolation of North Korea, South Korea has made increased use of diplomacy and engagement in the last decade. Since its admission to the United Nations in 1991, South Korea has pursued a foreign policy in which "economic considerations have a high priority.... The ROK seeks to build on its economic accomplishments to increase its regional and global role. It is a founding member of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum."³³ In addition to its close relationship with the U.S., the ROK "maintains diplomatic relations with more than 170 countries and a broad network of trading relationships.... [South] Korea and Japan coordinate closely on numerous issues."³⁴ In addition to the more active role

the ROK has taken in international economic activities, it has also contributed troops to peacekeeping and humanitarian support operations in Somalia and East Timor.

INFORMATIONAL POWER

North Korea's penchant for secrecy has precluded it from fully benefiting from the information revolution. Although North Korean leader Kim Jong Il "is now pushing his best and brightest to learn ... [computer] technology," his impoverished country lags far behind the rest of the world.³⁵ Despite the fact that the North Korean "military, down to the battalion level, receives orders by computer," it takes commercial activities in Pyongyang three days to receive email from clients outside the country.³⁶ The entire focus of North Korea's information distribution is for internal operations, to the extent that "televisions and radios come with channels fixed for government-controlled media."³⁷

Development of the nation, rather than empowerment of the individual, appears to be driving DPRK efforts to develop domestic IT infrastructure and industry. Officials, scientists, and traders can now access and exchange information pertinent to their duties within the domestic Kwangmyong Intranet. Those with a "need to know" can even surf the worldwide Web for the latest foreign data.... Pyongyang is using IT to indoctrinate the public and put its propaganda before foreign audiences.³⁸

The ROK on the other hand, with its free press and scientific prowess, has fully exploited the power of information management technology. It has a highly developed print and visual media. The rapid expansion of its information technology industry "resulted in diverse spill-over effects such as activating wired and wireless e-commerce ... and changing distribution channels."³⁹ The ROK government has used the digital revolution to change very lifestyle of its population with an "industrial policy aimed at promoting the digital economy through the creation and expansion of connectivity, capacity, and content."⁴⁰

ECONOMIC POWER

The policies pursued by the DPRK have resulted in an economic disaster. Although it "gained some temporary success as a planned industrial economy after the Korean War, that model ultimately worked no better in East Asia than it did in the Soviet Union."⁴¹ This has resulted in a situation in which the citizens of North Korea:

Must each get by on the equivalent of just \$1,000 a year (and even that is a generous estimate based on so-called purchasing power parity measures; \$500 may be a fairer estimate). North Korea's current economic growth rate, after a decade of sustained decline, is estimated at negative three percent a year. Its terms of trade generally deteriorated throughout the 1990s and have continued to produce poor results in recent years.⁴²

Although North Korea has recently experimented with some limited capitalism initiatives, in the short run these reforms have exacerbated its problems as “about 1 million urban workers have fallen victim as once centrally controlled industries have had to cut costs and jobs among free market pressures....”⁴³ In the long run:

The North is in no position to compete. It is an economic wreck, with an economy that South Korean analysts estimate to have shrunk by half between 1993 and 1996 alone.... Food production is down 60 percent in the last 15 years. Much of the country lacks electricity much of the time. Life expectancy fell 10 percent during the 1990s. During the same decade hundreds of thousands of people – perhaps 2 million – have starved to death. Approximately six in 10 North Koreans are malnourished. The country has been reduced to begging for millions of tons of food aid.⁴⁴

In comparison to its neighbor and by almost any measure, South Korea is an economic dynamo. The ROK, “a country known for subsistence farming and an autocratic government at the time of the Korean War, ... is now a healthy democracy with per capita income approaching \$15,000 a year – nearly comparable with the living standards in Portugal or Spain.”⁴⁵ Its gross domestic product of \$462 billion in 2000 ranks it as the world's 12th largest economy.⁴⁶ It has leveraged its power in information technology to play “an increasingly significant role in the formation of added economic value and sustainable economic growth.”⁴⁷

Yet despite its significant economic power, the ROK continues to maintain that its current economy makes it unlikely that it will be able to afford improvements to its defensive capability that will make it independent of U.S. assistance. For example, in a recent analysis, the ROK Ministry of National Defense (MND) claimed it could not afford an intelligence collection and management system that would enable it to maintain “an independent and complete eye on the enemy.”⁴⁸

MILITARY POWER

Although North Korea does not come close to matching South Korea in other elements of power, its armed forces, known collectively as the Korean People's Army (KPA), “is an imposing and formidable force of 1.17 million active personnel with a reserve force of over 5 million, making it the fifth largest military force in the world.”⁴⁹ These forces far exceed those necessary for defensive purposes and “the offensive character of Pyongyang's military strategy is demonstrated by the organization and deployment of its forces.”⁵⁰ In addition to its massive conventional forces, “the KPA maintains the largest special operations force (SOF) in the world, consisting of approximately 100,000 highly trained, totally dedicated soldiers.”⁵¹ Finally, as discussed earlier, the North has extensive programs to produce weapons of mass destruction:

Key elements of Pyongyang's military strategy include the employment of weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear (as recently revealed by Pyongyang) and missile systems including short and medium-range and probably intercontinental missiles. The commander of US forces in Korea assesses that North Korea has large chemical weapon stockpiles, is self-sufficient in the production of chemical agents, and may have produced enough plutonium for at least two nuclear weapons.⁵²

Although smaller than their northern counterpart, the ROK armed forces are formidable in their own right. With a strength of "685,000 active duty troops and 4.5 million reservists," it is "in general something more than half the size of North Korea's whether one thinks in terms of personnel, major equipment holdings, or force structure."⁵³ And of course, in the event of a North Korean attack, the South Koreans would be fighting on the defense over terrain that offers many advantages to a defending force.

GROUND COMBAT FORCES

North Korean ground forces are "organized into eight infantry corps, four mechanized corps, and armor corps and two artillery corps."⁵⁴ The corps control a total of "176 combat divisions and brigades, comprising 33 infantry/motorised infantry divisions/brigades, 37 paramilitary training unit divisions, one tank division, one ballistic missile division, 13 tank brigades, 25 mechanised brigades, 31 artillery/MRL/heavy mortar brigades, 14 light infantry brigades, three airborne brigades, three airborne sniper brigades, two navy sniper brigades, three sniper brigades, six coastal security brigades and four border security brigades."⁵⁵ These forces are arrayed in a "forward operational echelon of four infantry corps; supported by a second operational echelon of two mechanized corps, the armor corps and artillery corps; and a strategic reserve of the remaining two mechanized corps and the other artillery corps."⁵⁶

Their South Korean opponents are organized into three field armies and a corps-sized capital defense command. Two of these field armies, each composed of multiple corps, are positioned well-forward, defending likely enemy avenues of approach. The other field army defends the rear areas of the country.⁵⁷ The field armies and capital defense command and control a total of 19 infantry and three mechanized divisions on active duty and another 23 reserve component divisions. Additionally, the ROK has two Korean Marine Corps (KMC) divisions.⁵⁸

Although inferior in numbers, the ROK Army has made great improvements in the quality of its equipment. The MND plans to improve its "maneuver/strike forces structure... with more emphasis placed on quality than on quantity. Also, more emphasis will be given to the acquisition of MLRS [multiple-launch rocket system], K1A1 tanks, and K-9 self-propelled artillery to expand capabilities in offensive mobile warfare and strategic target strikes."⁵⁹ Additionally, the ROK plans to improve its command, control, communications, computers and intelligence

(C4I) by acquiring surveillance satellites, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), and a tactical C4I system.⁶⁰

Air and Naval Forces

Both KPA and ROK air and naval forces are relatively small in comparison to their massive ground components. The North Korean “air force consists of 92,000 personnel and is equipped with some 730 mostly older combat aircraft and 300 helicopters. The 46,000-man KPA navy is primarily a coastal force.”⁶¹ This navy fields vessels “that can be divided into seven main groups: frigates (numbering just 3), torpedo craft (about 100), patrol craft (roughly 158, of which 133 are for coastal and river operations), submarines (as noted, about 26, of old Soviet designs as well as 55 miniature subs for special forces as noted), amphibious ships (a total of 10), and mine warfare ships (23).”⁶²

Their ROK adversaries field “an excellent air force of approximately 550 modern tactical aircraft” that operate from “significant number of hardened air bases....”⁶³ The ROK Navy is equipped with “39 major surface combatants, and 20 submarines.... Finally, it also possesses 84 patrol and coastal ships, as well as 15 mine warfare ships, 12 amphibious vessels, and 60 naval combat aircraft.”⁶⁴ South Korea is modernizing its air and naval forces. It has decided to acquire the F-15K fighter to maintain air superiority and gain precision strike capabilities.⁶⁵ At sea, the Navy plans to procure the “7000-ton class destroyer (KDX-III) ... and 214-class submarines... to protect the SLOCs [sea lines of communications] and to expand its maritime control capability.”⁶⁶

Comparison of Combat Potential

Despite the numerical superiority of the North Korean forces, the ROK’s armed forces stack up quite well. Citing evaluation methodology used by the Pentagon’s Office of Net Assessment, Dr. Michael O’Hanlon, a defense expert and senior fellow at the Brookings Institute, believes that the South Korean’s “ground combat weapons capabilities to be roughly three-fourths as great as the DPRK’s....”⁶⁷ In the air, the ROK fares even better, “factoring in attack helicopters, its aggregate air capabilities are slightly greater than the North’s....”⁶⁸ The South’s navy is also highly effective and has outmatched its northern counterpart in several recent clashes along the sea frontier.

There is still room for improvement in the ROK’s capabilities, particularly “in the areas of command, control, and communications; chemical and biological defenses; and precision munitions.”⁶⁹ The ROK MND has also stated that it is not yet ready to assume responsibility for

the counter-artillery fire headquarters and Joint Security Area (JSA) missions.⁷⁰ Despite these shortfalls, in a purely defensive operation to repel a North Korean attack and restore the status quo, the ROK armed forces appear more than adequate for the task.

OVERALL ASSESSMENT OF DEFENSE CAPABILITIES

The ROK is clearly superior to the DPRK in the diplomatic, informational, and economic measures of national power. Although the North Koreans have a clear quantitative advantage in military power, the ROK has a growing qualitative edge. Moreover, the ROK spends just about 3 percent of its GDP on defense in comparison with the 3.3 percent spent by the U.S. and the 25 percent spent by the DPRK.⁷¹ A relatively small increase in defense spending by the ROK could significantly improve its military ability to defend itself and further reduce its dependence on U.S. forces. In its most recent statement on defense policy, the ROK MND has sought a national consensus for increasing defense spending to 3.2 – 3.5 percent of GDP.⁷² This would still be significantly lower than the 6.3 percent spent by Israel and Taiwan, countries that also face a constant threat from powerful adversaries.⁷³

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE STATIONING OF U.S. FORCES IN KOREA

The U.S. must act on the findings of its ongoing evaluation of its force structure in Korea in the context of the entire Pacific region as well as its worldwide commitments. With the heavy requirements for ground combat forces to prosecute the global war on terror and to maintain an open-ended commitment for stability and support operations in Iraq, we can ill afford to have ground forces tied to one area. This situation is exacerbated because at any given time one or two maneuver brigades are being transformed to Stryker Brigade Combat Teams or to digitized heavy brigades and are therefore unavailable for employment.

ELIMINATE REDUNDANT HEADQUARTERS

The senior U.S. commander in Korea commands the ROK – U.S. Combined Forces Command (CFC), the United Nations Command (UNC) and U.S. Forces Korea (USFK), a sub-unified command of USPACOM. The U.S. Army currently devotes two army service component command (ASCC) headquarters, a corps headquarters and two theater support command headquarters to the USPACOM AOR.⁷⁴ These Army and joint headquarters command, control and support just two Army infantry divisions (one in Korea and one in Hawaii), each of which is short a ground maneuver brigade, and a separate light infantry brigade in Alaska. This proliferation of headquarters, the heavy focus on Korea, and significant amount of effort

preparing forces for a war on the peninsula, is not an efficient use of high-demand personnel billets and other increasingly scarce resources.

A more efficient Army force structure for command and control of its forces in Korea and in the Pacific would be to eliminate one of the ASCC headquarters in Korea along with one of the theater support command headquarters. The remaining ASCC headquarters could continue to be stationed in Hawaii with a small forward element remaining in Korea. The two theater support command headquarters, the 19th Theater Support Command in Taegu, ROK and the 9th Theater Support Command at Camp Zama, Japan, could be downsized and combined into one command stationed in Japan with a small forward element in Korea. These steps would help reduce our footprint in the ROK.

GROUND COMBAT FORCES

The major U.S. ground combat element in Korea, the 2nd Infantry Division, should be withdrawn and re-stationed at Fort Lewis, Washington. One brigade could be stationed in Korea well south of the DMZ and Seoul on a rotational basis. This brigade could reinforce ROK Army forces in the event of war, however it should also be available for employment elsewhere in the Pacific theater. A Stryker Brigade Combat Team (SBCT) would probably be an ideal force for this mission if the Army achieves its goal of fielding six Stryker brigades, a number which would allow an adequate total number of SBCTs in the continental U.S. for rotation purposes. This would lead to a significant reduction in the total strength of U.S. forces in Korea during peacetime and a presence that may be more acceptable to the increasing number of Koreans that are calling for withdrawal.

Although it clearly makes sense to re-deploy the 2nd Infantry Division, the U.S. may want to consider maintaining its presence in the near-term for leverage in an effort to convince the ROK to contribute a division to the coalition in Iraq. The Korean press has reported that “the United States has asked South Korea for a light infantry division ... to help keep the peace in Iraq....”⁷⁵ The deployment of a South Korean division would enable the U.S. to establish a more sustainable rotation plan for U.S. divisions in Iraq and enhance ROK - U.S. cooperation under the ROK - U.S. Mutual Defense Treaty. The ROK government subsequently declined to provide a division and has limited the additional deployment of troops to a force of about 3,000.⁷⁶ However, perhaps future changes in the Iraq security situation may enable the U.S. to reengage on this issue for future Iraq troop rotations. Withdrawal of the 2nd Infantry Division could be deferred until the requirements for coalition ground forces in Iraq have been significantly reduced.

The U.S. should also take a realistic look at the type of forces it has assigned a mission to be prepared to reinforce the defense of Korea. According to the president of the Pacific Forum of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, “a Korea contingency is a primary focus for the Army’s 25th Infantry Division....”⁷⁷ This division is a light infantry force and its official web site states that it “routinely deploys from Schofield Barracks to participate in exercises in ... Korea....”⁷⁸ Although these deployments may have engagement and training benefits, for wartime defensive operations, it makes little sense to deploy additional light infantry forces to Korea. The ROK Army currently has nineteen infantry divisions on active duty and within a couple of weeks of mobilization it can have another 23 reserve component infantry divisions in its order of battle.⁷⁹ U.S. forces with a mission to deploy to Korea in an emergency should have capabilities that complement the ROK forces and add qualities that they do not possess instead of merely bringing forces with capabilities that can more than adequately be provided by the host nation. For example, because the ROK Army has few heavy divisions, it may be desirable to add a second pre-positioned set of equipment for an Army heavy brigade to the existing set that is maintained at Camp Carroll, near Taegu. As additional resources become available, both sets could be modernized with digital equipment to increase combat power.

AIR AND MARITIME FORCES

In the future, the U.S. support to the defense of the ROK should be mainly provided in the form of air and maritime power as previously advocated in the Nixon doctrine. Heavy U.S. ground forces would deploy and fall in on pre-positioned as a last resort, rather than being forward deployed as a tripwire. The U.S. Air Force currently stations two fighter wings in Korea, one at Osan Air Base south of Seoul and another at Kunsan Air Base along the southwest coast.⁸⁰ The Air Force should continue to maintain these forces at a high state of readiness, fully focus them on the Korean Theater of Operations and modernize them as required. The current Air Force structure can probably support dedicating these two wings solely to Korea better than can the Army, with its limited structure and current commitments, dedicate two maneuver brigades solely to Korea.

U.S. Navy and Marine forces in Korea are relatively small and are focused on reinforcing the existing U.S. forces on the peninsula. These services can make a substantial contribution to the defense of Korea without having a large permanent presence in the country. Naval forces currently home-ported in Japan and Marine Corps units in Okinawa are well positioned to rapidly respond to a contingency on the Korean Peninsula as well as elsewhere in the Northeast Asia region. The Marines should continue to rotate forces to conduct exercises regularly in

Korea. In the event that it eventually becomes impossible or undesirable to continue to maintain the current, relatively large Marine ground force in Okinawa, the U.S. could consider stationing a Marine ground combat element in the Pohang area. The Marines currently maintain an austere expeditionary camp on the southeastern Korean coast that can probably be expanded.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the current tensions over the North Korean nuclear weapons program along with strategic value of maintaining some U.S. forces in Northeast Asia make it undesirable to totally withdraw U.S. forces from the Korean Peninsula. However, some adjustments in the current U.S. order of battle home-based in Korea are clearly warranted. Although current air force troop levels should be maintained, the ground force component of USFK should be downsized. This will result in a reduction in troop strength from 38,000 to about 25,000. Our past experience with U.S. troop reductions in Korea has proven that cuts can be made without destabilizing the region.

The ROK military is becoming increasingly capable and, with its robust economy, the country can clearly do more in its own defense. It should focus its efforts on improving its capabilities in command, control, and communications; chemical and biological defenses; intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance; precision munitions and counter-fire.

Finally, U.S. Army forces in Korea must be repositioned to locations south of Seoul. This measure will increase the survivability of our ground forces in Korea in the event of a sudden North Korean attack, give us increased flexibility to use military force on the peninsula, and enhance the usefulness of these forces throughout the Pacific theater.

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